

You Choose by HashtagLEH

Series: [Something Like a Family \[16\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst with a Happy Ending, Billy calls Steve "baby", Coming Out, Declarations Of Love, Domestic Fluff, Established Relationship, Family Dynamics, Fluff, Found Family, Good Parent Joyce Byers, Graduation, Jane Austen novels make a reappearance, M/M, Outing, Parental Jim "Chief" Hopper, Pet Names, Soft Billy Hargrove, Steve Gets a Hug, Steve Harrington Has Bad Parents, Steve Harrington Needs a Hug, Supportive Joyce Byers, Tooth-Rotting Fluff, because I'm weak for that shit, because i had to, but I love it too much to change it, idk - Freeform, or maybe it's more like, seriously the end of this is so fluffy, shit I didn't mean to make him THAT soft

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Tommy Hagan, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Everyone, Billy Hargrove & The Party, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington & Everyone, Steve Harrington & The Party

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Steve and Billy talk about college, their relationship, and their family.

You Choose

Steve sighed as he woke up to the sun streaming through the window, curtains still open from where he'd forgotten to pull them shut before falling asleep the night before. He glared a little in its direction, because with the position of the sun in the sky he knew that his alarm was just a few minutes from going off so he could get ready for school.

He rolled to his other side, turning his back to the window, and he could feel the soft smile that fell across his face when his gaze rested on Billy next to him under the covers. Billy wasn't able to come over too often to spend the night, too leery of his dad suspecting that something was going on and not wanting to be outed again – or worse. Billy had told Steve enough pieces over time that Steve knew enough of what had happened in California for them to move to Hawkins that he knew that he *hated* Neil Hargrove with a fierce passion. He couldn't do anything about it though, because it would just result in Billy getting the brunt of the repercussions, so he just kept his distance from the older man and never went over to Billy's house. He had yet to actually meet Neil, but he had seen him enough from a distance to just know that there was something very *off* about the man – and that was even without learning such from Billy.

He wasn't thinking about that right then, though. Instead, he was staring at Billy's face, relaxed in sleep and not at all looking like a peaceful angel or some shit but the sight of him sleeping in Steve's bed made his heart tug with fondness anyway. His hair was tangled and frizzing from rolling around in his sleep, and the corner of his mouth was damp with a bit of drool, but the pillow creases on his cheek – he must've just rolled over recently for them to still be so visible – made affection rise in his heart, and the fading hickey on his collarbone – low enough that he could cover it with a shirt – made possessiveness stir in his gut.

"I can feel you staring," Billy muttered, his eyes still closed. "Creep."

Steve huffed a laugh through his nose and shoved himself closer to Billy now that he knew that doing so wouldn't disturb his sleep. (Billy was always at least a little tired. He needed all the sleep he

could get.)

"It's not creepy to appreciate how hot my boyfriend is," he countered.

"Is," Billy insisted, but he wrapped his arm around Steve's waist to accept his closeness, opening his eyes just long enough to find Steve's lips, kissing him with his bad morning breath and all. Steve returned the kiss, pulling away just as the alarm began to beep on his nightstand. Reaching across Billy, he slapped the button on top to get the beeping to stop, and then let himself drop on top of Billy, draped over him.

"Oof," Billy wheezed as Steve dropped his weight on top of him. "Jesus, pretty boy, lay off the milkshakes."

"I don't wanna go to school today," Steve whined a little, scooting back some so that it was only his top half on top of Billy, taking most of the weight off. "Wanna just stay in bed with you."

"C'mon, we've only got a few weeks left till we're free," Billy poked Steve in the side, despite the fact that Steve was certain that Billy didn't want to go to school any more than he did. Who would've thought that *Billy* would be the responsible one in the relationship?

"Ugh, don't remind me," Steve moaned. "Then we gotta be responsible adults and shit."

"Says who?" Billy countered, arm tightening around Steve's waist. "I'm not only gonna be an irresponsible fuck, but I still have months to go before I'm an adult, and I'm taking full advantage of that."

"You figure out what you're gonna do till then yet?" Steve asked curiously.

Billy hummed noncommittally. "The pool will probably have an opening for a lifeguard, I can have a job over the summer. Still gonna have to drive Max around to keep my old man happy."

"Did you find out yet about schools?" Steve asked, despite the pain in his heart at the thought of Billy leaving. He didn't know how long he could expect this relationship to last, if Billy went through with what

he'd talked about months ago, moving back to California and didn't include Steve in the picture. He wanted to do all he could to forestall that pain, but part of him needed to know. Just in case he *was* still in the picture then.

Billy laughed a little at his question. "Here you are avoiding going to school and then you bring it up again – thought you were trying to talk me out of going today."

"I definitely am," Steve said quickly, because the thought of going to school that day sounded *exhausting*. "Forget about school. Do you want to make pancakes? Pancakes sound good."

Billy laughed and pushed himself to sit up, patting Steve's ass to prod him up as he did. "Not a chance, Harrington. Up and at 'em. It's Friday, and then we've got the whole weekend ahead of us."

Steve groaned theatrically as he rolled out of bed, and they proceeded to get ready for the school day. It wasn't until Steve was in his seat in first period that he realized that Billy hadn't answered his question about college.

Steve puttered about his house, humming along to the radio as he tidied up. Billy had begun leaving so much of his stuff scattered everywhere that it almost looked like a house that Steve and Billy shared sometimes. It made Steve a bit wistful but also very pleased, not only that Billy was comfortable enough to leave his mark on the place, but that it almost made what they were doing more *real*. Like there was actual, physical evidence that said "Billy Hargrove was here!" and not just Steve's imagination.

There was also this idea sitting in the back of Steve's mind, that he would like to have this casual domesticity all the time.

He didn't want to tell Billy that, though. He didn't want to push too much on him, not without Billy being the one to reach out first, because he didn't want to scare him away. He would take whatever it was Billy had to offer, and he would take it *gladly*. He already felt lucky enough that he could do things with Billy – things like kissing

and having sex and even just spending time together or getting high – and anything else at this point was just an added bonus.

He walked into the living room, glancing around and seeing immediately the hoodie Billy had left slung over the arm of one couch last time he'd been over for the night. It was a plain black one that had appeared in Billy's wardrobe sometime in December, but never to school. He only wore it when he was comfortable with the people he was around, like Steve or the kids. It was worn and stretched out, a little too big for Billy even still, and it had a hole in the cuff of the right sleeve from where Billy had pushed his thumb through over time.

Picking up the hoodie, he raised it to his nose, smile crossing his face immediately and instinctively at the whiff of cologne and cigarette smoke and pure *Billy* that he got from it. He didn't used to understand why the girls he went out with wanted to steal his jackets so much, but after dating Billy he got it. It reminded him of his boyfriend when he wasn't there, gave him that wash of familiarity that made his stomach flutter.

Still smiling, he lowered the hoodie from his nose and slung it over his arm before pausing and pulling it on over his head instead. It was mid-April, so it wasn't quite to the season where it would be too warm to wear it, and Billy wasn't there yet, so he could wear it for now and take it off before Billy arrived.

He went to grab the empty beer cans from the table on the other side of the couch, and as he did his leg brushed against the corner of a paper shoved under the couch cushions, pulling it out with his movement. He stopped before it could fall out completely, reaching over to grab it, wondering at why it had been under there.

He immediately realized that it wasn't a paper that had been under the cushion – it was an envelope full of them, a piece of mail. And the label had Billy's name on it, but Steve's address typed out below the *William Hargrove*. He vaguely remembered the fact that Billy had been bringing the mail in every day for a couple of weeks back at the end of February and the beginning of March, but after the whole thing with Tommy it was like he'd forgotten about it. Steve hadn't thought anything of it; it was always junk mail for his parents

anyway, which he threw away because he knew whatever offers the mail had would expire before his parents deigned to return to see it.

He hadn't thought about the fact that maybe Billy hadn't wanted Steve to see that there was mail coming for him at Steve's address, and his lips twitched a little with fondness that Billy was settling himself into the place – just as Steve wanted him to.

It didn't explain why the mail had been shoved under the couch cushion like he was trying to hide it, though – but then he saw the return address.

Curiously, he opened the envelope that had already been torn along the top, so clearly Billy had already opened it and seen it. Pulling out the cover letter, he scanned over the words on the page, excitement growing.

It didn't feel like all that much later when the front door opened, and Billy's voice called out his presence even as he closed the door behind him. He was clearly wearing his sneakers, because his footsteps were quieter than they would have been had he been wearing his heavy boots. His keys jangled as he shoved them into his pocket.

"Hey, baby," Billy greeted as he walked up behind Steve, rounding the couch just as Steve turned and grabbed him by the lapels of his familiar denim jacket, pulling him onto the couch and then pushing him to sit back so that Steve could sit across his lap, cutting off Billy's next words with a kiss pressed to his mouth. Billy easily returned it, accepting the affection despite his apparent confusion for the speed and wordlessness of it all.

After a moment though, he pulled back a little from his excited boyfriend, laughing slightly. "Whoa, pretty boy, what's this for? Not that I'm complaining – I just want to know so I can be sure to do it again."

"You got into UCLA!" Steve cheered, one hand staying on Billy's jacket and one going to pump a fist in the air. "And on *scholarship*, I'm so proud of you!"

Immediately Billy's demeanor changed, as much as he tried to hide

the quick darkening of his features and the stress in the corners of his eyes. He glanced over next to them, seeing the large envelope he had forgotten to hide better after Steve had surprised him weeks before. The papers were sitting on top of the envelope, scattered and moved in such a way that it was apparent that Steve had read through everything.

“Oh, yeah,” Billy said a little awkwardly. “That.”

Steve paused where he had been about to continue his celebratory cheering, catching the tone in his boyfriend’s voice and squinting his eyes at him.

“I thought this was what you wanted,” he said slowly, eyebrows wrinkling. “You talked about UCLA a lot when we first started going to the quarry together. You wanted to go back to California.”

“Things have changed since then,” Billy said with a shrug that was just a bit too casual to actually *be* casual. “Kinda thinking I’ll stick around here for a little longer.”

Steve blinked at him, endlessly confused. “*Why?* You have a full-ride scholarship because you’re a fuckin’ *genius*, so it’s not like you couldn’t make it out there.”

Billy shrugged again, pushing a little so that Steve moved off of his lap, sitting beside him now. “I can go to a community college ‘round here too. Max is still in high school, and I don’t know what Neil will do without me around to pull his attention away from her. I can stick around for a bit just to be sure she’s safe.”

If Billy thought that his outright confession to his dad’s abuse – something that had only been talked about vaguely before or without names, despite the fact that they both knew who and what they were talking about when Steve was patching him up – was going to distract Steve enough to drop this line of questioning, he was dead wrong.

Steve narrowed his eyes at him, noticing the way that Billy wasn’t looking at him directly, or at the way he wasn’t moving at all, none of the usual absent tics he made when he wasn’t thinking. It was as

though Billy were trying too hard not to let on to the fact that he was hiding something; Steve wondered how anyone who knew him could ever fall for it.

“That’s not what you’re worried about,” he accused. “Come on, Bill, what’s going on? Why don’t you want to go out to California? It’s been your dream since being stuck out here.”

“Does it matter?” Billy demanded, expression going tense like he was holding back anger – or perhaps like he was trying to appear angry where he really wasn’t. “I’m not going. Maybe in a couple years, I dunno.”

“Why’d you bother applying though if you weren’t going to go?” Steve frowned, and then blinked suddenly, as he took in Billy’s tense posture and tight jaw line, the way he wouldn’t look at him, the fact that the address Billy had put down on his forms was Steve’s, but the deadline for the application was in January, before they were even dating – and that was if he hadn’t applied early back in November. The pieces slowly began to come together in his mind.

“You were trying to keep this from *me*,” he realized, fingers clenching unconsciously around his knee. “I asked about school, last week. You changed the subject.”

Billy’s frown deepened a little, going guilty. “Steve...”

“But you had to have planned to tell me at *some* point, right?” Steve went on, talking over the blond. “I would’ve started thinking something was wrong, soon. Were you just going to tell me you were denied? Because I would’ve known that was a lie – you’re way too smart to be denied from anywhere.”

Billy flushed a little, the way he always did when Steve gave him a genuine compliment that wasn’t just based on his looks, but for once didn’t try to deny it or say anything contrary about it. Then he frowned, remembering himself and the conversation, and he looked away, a flush rising in the back of his neck that this time had a distinct feeling of *embarrassment* to it.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he muttered, like Steve would do

something ridiculous like *make fun of* him for it. “And you’re back here, so what the hell does California have?”

Steve grinned, grabbing Billy by the chin, not ungentle, turning his face to him and planting a kiss on his lips. It was just as he had guessed.

Still holding his chin, he pulled back and looked into his boyfriend’s eyes lovingly and said, “Well, that would’ve made things awkward then, when September came around and I wasn’t here anymore.”

Billy frowned, a hint of panic appearing in his eyes as Steve’s words sunk in. “You’re leaving Hawkins? Where are you going?”

Steve exhaled a little laugh through his nose. “California, you big doofus.”

Billy’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and then his expression went understanding, and then happy, and then confused again. “What’s in California?”

Steve didn’t answer, rising to his feet and making a motion for Billy to stay seated. He went to his dad’s office down the hallway, grabbing a stack of papers off the desk and blowing at the faint layer of dust that had appeared in its time there. Going back to the living room, he sat back down next to Billy, handing him the papers.

Billy stared down disbelievingly at the papers as Steve began to speak.

“I kept them in my dad’s office so that you wouldn’t see them yet, because that’s the only place you don’t go into. But I figured even *before* we started dating, you’re my best friend and even if nothing ever happened I would still want to be around you, and I know we haven’t really talked about the far future or anything or even if you still want to be together after we graduate, but you’ll still be my best friend anyway, so...”

“Holy shit,” Billy blurted, finally finding his voice, apparently. “You’re going to UCLA.”

Steve smiled, a little nervously because he still didn’t know Billy’s

plans, really. “I didn’t think I would get in honestly, because my grades are shit, but I talked with my dad and we made a deal, and he greased some palms with admissions so they decided to focus on my extracurriculars instead. I wasn’t going to say anything until you said what your plans for school were, because I didn’t want to put pressure on you, but then you started saying shit about not going.”

“No – fuck,” Billy cut him off, tossing the papers to the coffee table and grabbing Steve with hands cradling the sides of his head, pulling him in to press a hard kiss to his lips. “You’re going. *We’re* going. Shit, I didn’t even know this was an option – this is *great!*”

Steve’s grin grew in response to Billy’s own, his infectious enthusiasm. “Yeah?”

“Yes, holy shit,” Billy said, practically giddy with his excitement. He pressed another kiss to Steve’s lips, before releasing him to gather up the acceptance papers again. “Fuck, I can’t believe you would want to follow me to California. And for *school* – you *hate* school.”

“Well, you were willing to stay behind for me a minute ago, so I don’t know why this is so shocking,” Steve teased, endlessly relieved that he and Billy were on the same page with their intentions toward each other.

“Yeah, but that’s not weird, because I love you.”

“And?”

Steve stopped suddenly, staring at Billy, who had frozen in place at his own words, like he hadn’t meant to say them out loud, and they both stared at each other disbelievingly for a long moment, replaying the other’s words in their minds. They had been dating for almost three months, but they hadn’t said those words, for all else that they did to and with each other. Steve had been holding back his confession because he didn’t want to scare Billy away with it being so early; he wondered suddenly if Billy had been doing the same thing.

“You love me?” The words came from both of them at once, and they paused again before they were both suddenly unfrozen again.

Billy was the one to pull Steve in to rest over his lap again, but Steve was just as eager, pressing into him tightly as though any millimeter of distance would be painful, mouths meeting hotly in the middle, hands clenching in Billy's curls while Billy's hands squeezed at his waist.

Steve pulled back several moments later, and Billy's blue eyes opened again, so full of joy it was almost painful to look at directly.

"I love you," Steve said, almost frantically, like Billy might not believe it. "I love you so fucking much it hurts sometimes."

"Back atcha, pretty boy," Billy said, the look in his eyes soft.

Days later, Steve would tease him about how he hadn't even said the exact words back, but something casual, like it might soften the feeling behind them. Weeks later, Billy would spend his time pressing kisses into every inch of Steve's skin he could reach, an "I love you" whispered with each press of his lips. Months later, Steve wouldn't have any doubt at all about Billy's continued, unwavering love for him, would accept that Billy was in it for the long haul, just as Steve was. Years later, it would be obvious even to strangers how much they adored each other, because they were past the point of needing to hide it.

But for now, the two of them just met back in the middle to continue kissing.

Billy clearly knew something was wrong as soon as he saw Steve in the living room, sitting on the couch and staring at the phone in his hand. Normally that would make Steve happy, that Billy obviously knew him so well, but right then his mind was too far away to appreciate it, and he barely acknowledged Billy's greeting.

"Baby," Billy said, crouching in front of him and putting one hand on his knee, trying to catch his gaze before looking back at the phone sitting loosely in his hand. "What happened?"

He didn't ask whether something had happened – it was already

pretty clear that something *had*. Steve didn't want to bother him with something so *stupid*, though. He already knew that Billy's dad was a dick – his own problems were so small in comparison. Poor little rich boy, whose parents didn't love him or each other, who were never around, who left him in his big empty house with all the freedoms a teenage boy could possibly want. His classmates had never understood why he didn't like it, what loneliness felt like, because so many of them had commented on how *lucky* he was to have parents who didn't care what he did.

He didn't feel lucky. He didn't feel anything at all.

"It's nothing," Steve tried brushing Billy away, reaching over to set the phone back in the holder on the table beside the couch. "There's no problem. Do you want to eat? I'm thinking fried chicken."

"Steve," Billy stopped him from getting to his feet with both hands pressed to his knees. "Who was on the phone?"

Steve scoffed. "No one important." At least that part was true.

Billy didn't say anything then, but he just looked at him with an open expression, like he was perfectly willing to sit and wait until Steve spilled the beans on what had happened. Once upon a time, Billy would have just accepted Steve at his word, even if he didn't believe him, and would let himself be distracted because talking about feelings was difficult. The fact that he wasn't letting it go now made both fondness and irritation well up in him, because he really *didn't* want to talk about it, but he did want the comfort of Billy's presence.

"Just..." Steve finally broke, reluctant, "Just my parents."

Billy's thumbs were rubbing circles on the sides of Steve's knees. It tickled a little, but it was more soothing than anything, so Steve didn't pull away, accepting the small comfort. "Okay," he said. "What did they want?"

Steve blew out a breath, the puff of air making the hair falling over his forehead flutter a little. Distractedly, he pushed it back before dropping his hands to his lap, fidgeting a little with the sleeves of his shirt and gnawing on his bottom lip. He startled a little when he felt

Billy's fingers on his mouth, but allowed him to tug his lip out from between his teeth. Billy's expression was still so concerned, and with an uncharacteristic patience he just waited for Steve to say what he needed.

"They're not coming to my graduation," he blurted finally in a rush of words. He fought against the tightness squeezing around his throat, because he was *not* going to let himself cry.

"And I know, it's not a big deal," Steve hurried to say, not looking at Billy, because he was certain his expression was going to change into one of incredulous disgust that Steve was getting so worked up about this. "It's just that they said last semester that they would try to make it, but now they're in Hong Kong and they said they can't get out here even for the day of because they're so busy, but I really thought that this time at least they would keep their word, because this isn't some stupid eighth grade graduation, this is *high school*..."

"Hey, hey," Billy said, rising to his feet but only to sit next to him on the couch and wrap an arm around him, and Steve thought at first he was going to try to calm him down to get that high pitch out of his voice that said he was a second away from crying, but then the blond surprised him by saying, "This is a big deal, and your parents are a bag of dicks. You're not dumb for being upset about this."

Steve sniffed back against the rising tears, not letting them fall and not otherwise acknowledging them because maybe then they would go away, like they always did when this happened.

"It's not like it's a surprise," Steve tried, halfheartedly defending his parents despite having no real reason to do so. "They always do this anyway. Last time I saw them was right after school started."

"That doesn't make it better, Stevie – that makes it *worse*," Billy said, still with that unbearable gentleness as he rubbed his hand slowly up and down Steve's arm. His words, and his validation of Steve's upset emotions, just made Steve want to cry even *more*, and he scrunched his face against it to try and keep it back, ducking his head to rest on Billy's shoulder so he didn't have to look at him and so Billy couldn't see his face either.

Billy's hand went to the side of Steve's head, keeping him in place and scratching through his hair as he said, "It's okay to cry, baby. Or just sit here – whatever you want."

Something unclenched in Steve's chest at the tacit permission, but he didn't really think he was going to cry until he was watching as a single tear dripped off the end of his nose, landing on the leg of Billy's jeans and creating a small round spot that was darker than the denim around it.

Billy didn't say anything – about the crying or about anything else – and just continued to scratch soothingly over his scalp and through his hair. Steve shuddered a little – with relief or with tears or with love for the boy next to him, he didn't know – and let the tears continue to fall, allowing himself to feel the disappointment and betrayal his parents' words usually brought as much as he needed to.

He didn't sob – his crying was silent, but Billy seemed to sense anyway when he began to calm, and his hand went to Steve's arm again, not stopping his soothing movements but leaving him to decide when he wanted to raise his head without Billy's hand impeding him.

Eventually, Steve did raise his head, pulling himself off of where he had been resting the whole body weight of his top half on Billy, scrubbing his hands over his face to try and rid himself of the puffiness. He didn't think Billy would judge him for his tears – he'd been the one to encourage them, after all – but still he was embarrassed by the way he'd just fallen apart all over him now that he was coming back to himself again.

Billy didn't let him pull away completely though, taking his face in his hands as soon as Steve dropped his own, and he carefully kissed Steve's left eyelid, and then the right, his facial hair grown out just enough to be soft against his skin. Then he pressed a chaste kiss to his lips, thumb rubbing under one eye before he pulled back.

"How about a shower?" Billy suggested. He must've seen the look on Steve's face, because he grinned a little and clarified, "Just you. Take some time for yourself, and I'll be ready with food when you're done."

Steve nodded in agreement, because a shower *did* sound nice right then, and wandered upstairs to his bathroom, turning on the water as hot as he could stand.

He didn't know how long he stood under the water, calming under the steam and the memory of how lovingly Billy had cared for him, literally given him a shoulder to cry on without an ounce of judgement. He felt better though as he turned off the water, drying off with perfunctory movements and wrapping the towel around his hips before opening the door to his bedroom.

He wasn't really surprised to see Billy lounging on his bed, but it was unexpected. He was still wearing his shoes, legs bent and one crossed over the other as he read from a tattered copy of one of his Jane Austen novels. (Steve had been surprised when he had learned how much Billy loved the author, but when Billy had grumbled about how his mom had liked them, and that they were her copies and all he had from her besides his necklace, he had understood and hadn't teased him at all about it.)

Billy looked up at Steve when the bathroom door opened and steam billowed out, and grinned happily at the sight of him as he sat up and set his book aside.

"So I was going to make you food myself," he started with, while Steve went to grab clothes from his dresser. "But then I thought of Joyce, and it turns out she's making tacos"—which was about the only good thing she made, they both knew from experience—"which is perfect because it's Cinco de Mayo, so I invited us over for dinner."

Steve gave him a look as he tugged on his briefs. Billy immediately understood the look, and put his hands up like he was surrendering.

"Okay, so it was a mutual invitation," he insisted. "But the kids are going to be there too, so you know she already planned for enough food for the little gremlins and we wouldn't even make a dent in it."

"I thought Max was having a sleepover at Hopper's," Steve said as he pulled on a pair of his jeans, since they were apparently going out and not just lounging around his house for the rest of the night.

"She is," Billy confirmed, "But Hopper is taking both of 'em to Joyce's for dinner first, because Joyce has been giving him grief about his freezer meals anyway."

"So you're telling me *everyone* is going to be there, so we should go too?" Steve said dryly. He wouldn't put it past Billy calling up Joyce to plan it that way in an attempt to help him after his earlier upset, because his boyfriend knew that he cheered up when he was around the kids. But he could also see the validity in the points Billy made, and it was possible that this was a coincidence. Unlikely, but possible.

"Nancy and Jonathan will be at the Wheelers' for dinner," Billy reported, "But Joyce said they'd be back right after."

Steve blew out a sigh as he pulled his shirt on over his head, though he wasn't really annoyed. "Alright, fine," he said. "We're gonna bring something though to help out so we don't eat Joyce out of house and home."

Billy grinned. "There's just enough time to stop at the grocer's for tortilla chips."

They pulled up to the Byers' house a few minutes before five o' clock. The sun was shining brightly like it was only mid-afternoon rather than evening, thanks to the summer that was all but there, and Steve would've thought that they were getting there early – but the Chief's blazer parked next to Joyce's Pinto as well as the sounds carrying through thin walls of loud voices and laughter from the kids told him that they were actually the last to arrive.

Steve was tired, probably from the swirl of upset emotions, but he was glad to be able to see the kids, so he got out of the Camaro and followed after Billy into the house.

"BillyandSteve!" El shouted excitedly when they came in. She had started doing that a few weeks previous, just combining their names to slur together until they were one. Neither of them had commented on it, but Steve was pretty sure that it was her childlike

acknowledgement of their relationship, of how they came practically as a pair these days and everyone had noticed even if not everyone knew the true nature of their relationship.

A moment later El was squeezing each of them in a hug of greeting, which they returned easily and willingly, because by now they were used to this form of greeting, whether it had been hours or days since they had seen each other last.

“Hey, squirt,” Billy said, ruffling the hair that had gotten longer in the past few weeks so that it actually had some length rather than just a ring of curls around her head. He passed the bags of chips in his hands over to her. “Take these to the kitchen, will you?”

El accepted the bags, bounding off toward the kitchen in the back.

“Steve!” Dustin called over to them from where he was sitting across from Lucas at the coffee table. He was shaking out his arm like he was sore. “Back me up – no collarbones puts me at a disadvantage!”

“The hell are you doing now?” Steve said, wandering over to them.

“He lost an arm-wrestling competition against Lucas,” Max piped in dryly, rolling her eyes. That explained Lucas’ smug look, at least.

“I did not *lose*!” Dustin insisted, waving his hands expressively. “He *cheated*!”

“It’s not like he *chose* to have collarbones,” Mike retorted with a snort.

“You need to defend my honor!” Dustin declared, scooting over and waving at Lucas. “You can arm-wrestle him in my behalf!”

“What?!” Lucas squawked, and shook his head rapidly in denial. “We didn’t agree to have fighters *for* us!”

“What?” Dustin taunted. “You afraid you’ll lose?”

“Against *Steve*?” Lucas nodded expressively. “I *know* I will. If you’re choosing Steve, I’m choosing my fighter, too!”

Dustin snorted and shook his head. “Billy’s *muscles* have muscles – of *course* he’s going to win. No offense, Steve.”

“None taken,” Steve said dryly, sending a smile Billy’s way, because he’d spent enough time appreciating Billy’s muscles both from afar and up close, and the idea of losing to them didn’t make him upset like the kids might think – it made him *excited*. But those were not PG thoughts, so he shoved them away.

But Lucas was shaking his head in response to Dustin’s comments about Billy. “I’m not choosing Billy – I’m choosing *Max*.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up on his forehead, mirrored by Max as she looked at her boyfriend.

“You want me to fight your battles, stalker?” she said, but she sounded pleased below the almost daring tone.

“You’ll *win*,” Lucas said stoutly, and then visibly flushed when Max laid a kiss on his cheek.

“*Fine*,” Dustin said, waving for Steve to sit across from Max over the coffee table. “Steve is totally going to kick your ass.”

Bemusedly, Steve lowered himself across from Max, who was looking at him with determination.

“Who is Billy going to root for, though?” Mike questioned teasingly, looking up at where Billy still stood off to the side, arms folded as he watched Max and Steve put their elbows on the table, hands clasping together. As he spoke, El reappeared from the kitchen, settling in beside Mike.

“*Max*, obviously,” Lucas said like he was stupid. “She’s his *sister*.”

“I’m just saying, does boyfriend trump sister?”

The only sound then was the thud of Steve’s hand hitting the table as Max slammed it down too hard, having expected more resistance. But Steve stared at Mike, not paying any attention to the redhead, mouth dropped open and eyes slightly panicked. He swung his gaze to Billy, saw that he had dropped his arms from their folded position, had

taken a half step forward, expression tense as he took in everyone else's reactions, fingers twitching like he was preparing to grab Steve and get the hell out of there.

The silence was broken by Dustin reaching over and smacking Mike in the head, hard enough for the sound to echo through the room.

"Idiot, we're not supposed to know about that!"

Mike winced at the smack but didn't protest, already looking like he regretted his words. He opened his mouth to say something, but Steve spoke before he could.

"You know?" he croaked out, eyes darting between all of them – and sure enough, no one looked remotely surprised.

"You're kind of obvious," Lucas said apologetically, gaze darting between Steve and Billy, unsure how they were going to react. "At least in front of us. Most of us figured it out back in December."

"Oh, don't pretend – you didn't figure it out until last week," Dustin said, rolling his eyes.

"That's why I said *most* of us!" Lucas protested.

Max noticed Billy looking at her with a familiar look on his face, one that was slightly betrayed but like he was waiting for confirmation before he branded her a traitor. Her heart sank, knowing exactly what he was thinking, and even though it hurt she couldn't help feeling like she deserved it.

She shook her head rapidly. "I didn't tell them," she insisted, hoping that Billy believed her.

The look on his face didn't change, and he said, "I know you didn't. But did you know that they knew?"

Max shook her head again, relieved that Billy's suspicions weren't as bad as she had feared. "No! I would've told you if I thought anyone else knew."

"But we didn't want to freak you guys out, since you're keeping it a

secret for a *reason*,” Dustin said pointedly, glaring at Mike. “If you wanted us to know, you would’ve told us.”

“Sorry,” Mike muttered, glaring at the table in front of him, and while his tone wasn’t really apologetic, his body language was, proving that he was genuine even if it didn’t seem such immediately.

Billy blew out a breath, releasing the tension he held as he sat down beside Steve on the ground, relief filling him that his kids were all more than okay with everything.

“It’s fine, shortstop,” he finally said. His hand met with Steve’s under the table, out of sight, giving him a comforting squeeze, because he knew that as panicked as he’d been, Steve would’ve been worried too, both for the kids’ reaction and for Billy’s. Steve squeezed back before releasing it as Hopper poked his head around the corner.

“Are you kids done talking about feelings?” he said gruffly, apparently having heard the conversation and as unbothered as he ever was about it all. Billy was pretty sure that both Hopper and Joyce had known about him and Steve for months now, so he wasn’t too alarmed by his presence. “Tacos are ready.”

Steve let out a relieved laugh as the kids all started chattering again as they piled into the kitchen. When they were mostly alone, he tipped to rest his forehead on Billy’s shoulder, blowing out a tired sigh. They didn’t say anything, just sharing a quiet moment together before Dustin called to them to hurry up, and they followed the rest of them into the kitchen.

It was a couple hours later, with dinner cleaned up and all of them just spending time together chatting in the front room, Nancy and Jonathan back from dinner too (and apparently they had known about Billy and Steve too, which Steve needed to stop being surprised by, because Jonathan had always been one to *notice* things), that Billy settled in next to Steve on the couch, not feeling any worries about wrapping his arm around his shoulders and pressing his mouth close to Steve’s ear in a way that couldn’t be mistaken for mere platonic friendship. Steve leaned in closer too, accepting the casual affection as Billy spoke.

“You know, Max is my family,” he said quietly, words only for Steve to hear. “Neil isn’t.”

Steve blinked, about to question his statement, because Neil was his biological father, of *course* he was family – and Max was his stepsister; they weren’t related by blood, so claiming her without claiming Neil was –

And then he stopped, because he understood suddenly what Billy meant, and why he was saying this now.

“I choose my family,” Billy said seriously, nodding toward the rest of the room, to the people assembled there. “You can, too. You don’t have to claim your parents as anything more than the ones whose biological matter mixed to create you.”

Steve looked up as Billy stopped talking, letting him think about his words – which he did. He looked around at the kids, at the way they chattered and argued with each other nonstop, at Hopper and Joyce watching from their spot on the other couch, talking quietly with each other. He met Joyce’s eye; she gave him a motherly sort of smile before turning when Hopper said something to her. He realized what Billy was saying – Billy hadn’t claimed only Max as his family, but everyone else there, even Nancy and Jonathan, despite their somewhat rocky start. Hopper and Joyce were unmistakably parental, asking after them and making sure they were doing okay the same as they did for the kids, and Steve had obviously noticed how Billy cared for them, but he hadn’t ever really thought about how Billy had sort of quietly adopted them as his parental figures where he was lacking elsewhere. The kids were like his little brothers and sisters, and Nancy and Jonathan were like the cousins he hung out with more casually.

He remembered, suddenly, the way Billy repeatedly told him that Steve was *his*. This was usually in a much less chaste setting, so he hadn’t thought of it too much outside of that, but set in this different context, it seemed all the more important. Because while Steve’s relationship with him was obviously different than he had with anyone else, Billy considered Steve a part of his family, too.

And Billy was telling Steve – he could do the same thing. And Steve

realized suddenly that he already had. He hadn't put a label on his feelings of protection and possessiveness for everyone there in that room, but with Billy telling him that he could think of them as his family, too – it was like everything clicked into place.

He settled more firmly into Billy with this realization, squeezing the hand wrapped in his own in lieu of what he wanted to do, which was press a passionate kiss to his boyfriend's lips for helping him to come to this understanding. He could save that for later.

Weeks later, Steve walked across the stage to receive his diploma, grinning at the whoop Tommy gave as he stepped off the stage, and at Billy's smugly proud look as he glanced back at Steve, right in front of him as they were called off alphabetically. He looked out at the audience watching, seeing immediately the people he loved scattered throughout. Lucas and Dustin were sitting with the Byerses, and Joyce was cheering just as loudly for Billy and Steve as she had for Jonathan, while Will gleefully honked on his air horn. Hopper was standing as security on one end of the bleachers, and even his grin was visible beneath his bushy mustache. El was sitting with Max, a little bit of distance away from Max's parents, and she waved when she saw him look toward them, excited for his accomplishment. Robin was sitting just behind them, because while she was a senior she wouldn't be done with classes until December and would walk with next year's graduating class. She was grinning and clapping as Steve followed behind Billy to return to their seats, the principal still calling out names behind them.

His parents weren't there, but it didn't matter, because Steve – and Billy – had discovered something like a family in the other people who loved them instead, so Steve couldn't even be too upset anymore. Sitting down beside Billy in the metal folding chairs, he looked over at his boyfriend, jostling him a little in the side since he couldn't do the things he *wanted* to do in public like this. Billy's lips quirked, and he returned the light shove without looking at him.

Later, after they had tossed their caps in the air and some people from NHS started grabbing chairs to get them out of the way, their family came up to them excitedly cheering for them. The kids had

even made candy garlands for them from plastic wrap and string, which Billy hadn't expected but willingly accepted, despite Neil's raised eyebrow when he saw. He was too pleased at the moment to care about what his dad thought.

"We're *free*!" Tommy's voice shouted a moment before he tackled Steve from behind. Steve caught himself before he could fall, accepting the impromptu piggyback from his oldest friend, laughing as Tommy dropped back to his feet after a mere moment, jumping around like he was already drunk – which he very well might have been. "You hear that motherfuckers?!" He grabbed Billy by the shoulders, shaking him a little. "We're *done*!"

"Jesus, get *off*, Hagan," Billy said good-naturedly, shoving him away. With a last whoop, Tommy jumped away, seeing his girlfriend immediately a few yards away and going to swoop her into a *very* passionate kiss. Yes, Billy decided – he was definitely already drunk.

Neil patted his shoulder in congratulations before saying that he needed to get to work – he'd been sure to comment to Billy previously how he had taken a later shift so that he could make Billy's graduation, as though Billy was supposed to be *grateful* for that. Max begged to stay and hang out with her friend El, and after Neil's direction to make sure Max got home at a reasonable time, he and Susan disappeared.

"Jesus, glad *that* son of a bitch is gone," Hopper grumbled after they were gone, catching Billy in a hug, thumping him in the back. "Congrats, kid. You two are still planning to come to Joyce's tonight?"

"Yes, Sir," Steve said cheekily, accepting Hopper's hug after he'd released Billy. "You still planning on making deviled eggs?"

"I *will* get them right some day," Hopper said like it was a threat, pointing his finger in his face. Once upon a time, that would've made Billy tense in preparation for blows, but now he just watched with a satisfied smile.

Steve grinned, opening his mouth to say something before Robin suddenly appeared, shoving him in the side, large camera in her

hands.

“Alright, dingus, let’s get a picture of you with the fam,” she said strictly, and then raised her voice to the kids who were shouting over by Jonathan and Nancy. “Hey, nerds! Gather in! Chief, don’t you disappear on me – you’re in this picture, too. Okay, strange little girl, I’m not even gonna *ask* how you know everyone – you get in here, too. Wheeler, get your little brother under control – hey! Little Byers, squeeze in next to your brother – tighter than that, this is a big family and we need to get you all in the frame. Max, put down the bunny ears – Billy, *stop* poking her, oh my god – Steve, you *actual* child, that was not an invitation for you to do so instead...okay, now everyone say some corny shit like ‘cheese!’”

Jonathan made several copies of the picture. It went on everyone’s fridge.

Author’s Note:

This fic is brought to you by the song "Follow You" by Imagine Dragons. It's just Harringrove vibes all over, and I listened to it a lot while writing this one.

Do you know how badly I wanted to have Billy tell Steve "You're my new dream" a la Flynn Rider after Steve talked about his dream of moving back to California? I really wanted to. But ultimately I decided that would be too sappy and OOC for Billy, so I just hope y'all imagined it instead. Billy was thinking it, anyway.

Holy shit this story was so cheesy. Mostly the ending. But I like it, so there.

THIS SERIES IS NOT OVER. In case anyone was confused because of the sappy ending, because I will admit it does have a somewhat final feel to it. There should be three or four more installments before the end. :)